

Salvation's Breath

by Neo Maverick

Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2004-12-17 07:34:40

Updated: 2005-05-06 06:32:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 01:41:34

Rating: M

Chapters: 4

Words: 6,527

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Four soldiers are sent behind enemy lines to deal with an, as yet, unknown Covenant threat. But they're in for a big surprise, as a tool of the Covenant gets out of control, and becomes a hostile malefactor for both sides. And it's not what either thinks.

1. An Unknown Threat

Disclaimer: I do not raise claim to the Halo universe, Halo equipment, or any references to the games or franchise. I do own the characters in the following story.

Jonathan Hall leaned against the bulkhead at the back of his Longsword fighter, as he watched the engineers patch together the hull breach in the forward compartment created by a plasma explosion in space from a Covenant fighter. That event occurred three days ago. He'd lost his co-pilot that day. Hawk never saw the explosion coming, and neither had Hall. It completely destroyed the forward weapons control, and blew a five foot wide hole right under the pilot seats. They'd been blown right out into space. Hall was lucky. At least, he considered himself lucky. Regulations required that pilots always wear their zero-G gear while in space operations. Hawk didn't wear his that day. The damn man said he'd miss the launch sequence. Hall hadn't, and he'd taken the time to put the suit on.

They'd found the fighter derelict, but still flyable near the moon. It had drifted away from the Orbital Defense Grid after the fighting stopped. Ten of the Platforms, two squadrons of fighters, a couple cruisers, and a destroyer were all lost in the battle. The Covenant came with only two Assault Carriers and their escorts. Should've been easy pickings for the defense grid. So why are so many men now a landmark of a military fiasco?

"Hall!" He turned to face the voice, at the access hatch next to him. The first thing Hall saw was an empty eye socket. The scar mark of a Covenant energy sword was unmistakable. Nothing burned a man's face quite like that did. And somehow it looked like it just dug the man's

eyeball right from its socket, almost as if they were simply torturing the man. But the Covenant didn't keep a 'heretic' alive long enough to do that.

The owner of said voice and face was Base Commander Robert Doyle. He was the man who sent the fighters up half-loaded with their payloads. He was the man who didn't brief them on the enemy deployments. He was the man who sentenced Hall's entire squadron to death.

"Come with me." Doyle's voice required obedience, even amongst the most rebellious of soldiers. And Hall was no different. Dissenting, but submissive, Hall exited the fighter behind the footsteps of a man he considered a murderer.

There was something about Doyle that just set Hall off. Was it the unnatural click of his boots on the steel plating of the launch deck? Or the unseemly sheen on his shaven head? Or perhaps the gritty tone to his voice? Whatever it was, Hall seemed both drawn to and forced away from his commander. On the one hand, Doyle's excellent war record in the early years of the war fascinated him. There was so much to be learned from one of the first men to see a Covenant Elite up close. On the other hand, Doyle, himself, was repulsive. The man simply did not enjoy other human beings. He was fascinated by the enemy, and many called him a sympathizer. Hall had not joined in that crowd, knowing full well that Doyle wanted to personally retrieve his eye from the Covenant trooper that burned it out.

Doyle led Hall down the length of the massive launch bay. It had once held over two dozen Longsword fighters, many never having seen space before. Now, the four remaining were in shambles. Two were unfit for flight detail, and only one was even capable of combat. Hall's wasn't even in position to be called a fighter anymore. It was more like a junkyard on the deck,

At the far end of the massive room, there was a wide door. Hall had seen this door many a time, as it was the door that led directly to the briefing room. As he passed through it, he saw the faces of the dozen or so pilots he'd had breakfast with that morning, all charging off to go save the world from a menace they didn't understand. All of them were dead. Dragon flight would suffer greatly with their loss. So would Hall, and he knew it.

The long, wide passage further opened up into a darkened room. Set into one wall of the room were many rows of chairs, specifically placed for the Dragon squadron. They had the insignias of the squadron on the back of the seats. On the arm rests were the personal symbols of the individual pilots the seats belonged to. Front row, third seat from the left was a brown hawk head, its eyes flaming. That was Hawk's seat. Hall did not have an insignia yet. He had not 'earned' a call sign amongst the squadron. He'd been transferred to combat duty from the Academy only a week ago. Pilots rarely have their own call signs by then.

In the middle of the room was a holo-projector. The three-dimensional image presented would display the mission parameters, navigation points, and area of operations for all pilots in the briefing. Corresponding colors of red and blue would signify enemy or friendly targets, respectively. While the actual engineering of the projector was a mystery and a fascination of Hall's, he probably would never understand it. When the pilots had come in for the briefing on the

sudden call for fighters in high orbit, Doyle had never activated the projector, or given a verbal low down. He had just sent them on their way. Now that bastard had over thirty coffins to fill by nightfall. Some chore for him. A nightmare for Hall.

It took Hall a moment to even realize the other presences in the room. There were three individuals sitting amongst the seats. Two men and one woman. The woman wore the black and gray garb of what Hall called a 'grease monkey', also known as an engineer, but the gold and silver bars on her chest inferred some kind of a command. Her black hair was dazzling with its brown highlights and it fell across her face in a disorganized fashion just enough to hide some of her eyes in an inexplicably sensual way. She held her head high, but had it cocked to one side as she worked furiously on a piece of paper in front of her. Paper was hard to find. She must have either some good contacts, or she makes it herself. And as an engineer, the latter wasn't too unbelievable either.

The first man Hall locked eyes with appeared to be the most cocky, over confident man Hall had seen since the Academy. Deep green uniform, strong build, and the depth of his eyes indicated a marine stationing. Though not of high rank, this man had undoubtedly seen his share of battle, and judging by the way he held his left arm, he'd probably paid the price. The arm hung in a way the human arm was not intended to, flexing backwards against the elbow joint. That was no organic arm, but most likely a cyborg one. Replaceable limbs was the army's newest brain child, and it appeared that this man was a guinea pig for the project. Short, crew-cut black hair was mostly hidden under a cap kept half on his head. The dark brown eyes were set deep in his head, and entranced Hall for a second, until the two broke their antagonistic stares.

The final occupant was somewhat of a paradox. Head low, suspended off a giraffe's neck, this man wore a long lab coat of a civilian scientist. He typed at blinding speed across his keypad, writing something down for his journal. He was young. Hall knew this by the boy's eyes. He still had a tan line across the bridge of his nose from when he wore glasses, before he had his vision fixed. It hadn't been too long either. A pair of sunglasses were still stashed in his shirt pocket. Along with half a dozen digipens. Long, unkempt blonde hair fell across his blemished face, and his youthful exuberance was contained in the tenseness of his muscles, especially his upper body. The man looked up just enough to acknowledge Hall's entrance, then went back to his work.

Doyle walked to the front of the room, and pressed a button on the wall with one finger. The hum of the projector coming to life startled Hall for a moment. The sound seemed strangely alien to his ears. Ironical.

The base commander looked at the small group assembled in front of him. Hall and the engineer were paying attention, the marine was slouching and looked ready to fall into slumber, and the scientist boy was oblivious. Doyle cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. The marine let out his breath with a disgusted huff.

"Hey!" Doyle was immediately on him, "That kind of attitude gets you flushed into space, Corporal!"

"Yes, sir," The mock, southern accent of the marine grated on Hall's nerves.

After maintaining control of the room, Doyle commenced his briefing, "I suppose congratulations are in order. Standing before me are four of the best crew the UNSC has to offer.

"You are all likely wondering why you are here. Well, I'll tell you." As if on cue, the projector displayed its image. A bright three dimensional picture of the galaxy surrounding Earth was displayed. Among the various charted systems were several numbered ones, but in highlighted green was the system Reach. This generally signified an objective, so Hall paid much attention to this large dot in the grid. Doyle paused before continuing, "Three hours ago, our deep space probes detected a large surge of energy, generally accompanying many slip-space drives powering down, just inside Reach. This means that a large fleet is massing in this system, and it begun over a week ago."

The marine raised his head, "That long?" His normal, gruff voice was a welcome sound to Hall's ears.

Before Doyle could speak, the scientist chimed in, "It takes time for energy to transfer through space, even at the speed of light. This is as quickly as you can get information at this range."

"Getting back on topic," Doyle interjected before the boy could open his mouth again, "this means we have a critical situation."

"We have a critical situation here." the Engineer said, "Half our Longswords are down, five destroyers crippled, and a couple cruisers damaged. You want to hold off a Covenant fleet with that, now half-assed, defense grid? We need time to get it fixed."

Doyle smiled that evil smile that told Hall that the main point had been reached, "And so I call you here. You'll all find this interesting, so pay attention."

A video feed brought up in place of the map. It called up from Reach, so it was safely assumed that it was coming from that system. The video feed was sketchy, but the unmistakable look of a Covenant fleet in debris form was present. Blue explosions, green sparks, and smooth hull panels littered the field of view. Not a single Covenant ship was intact.

"Jesus H. Christ," Hall whispered softly.

Doyle leered at Hall, letting him know that taking the 'Lord's' name in vain would not be tolerated, "This fleet was what we detected. Or what's left of it."

The marine inched forward in his seat, the video feed piquing his interest, "What kind of weapon would do something like that.?"

Doyle's lowered head lifted for a moment to point out the next image, "Computer: zoom ten times on grid square 5B." The image was pulled up.

The whole room seemed to gravitate away from the picture before them.

The ship must've been over ten kilometers long. Ship design was similar to the assault carriers, but nothing was that big. The sleek, off-white color of the hull remained, and was even more stunning at the impressive size of the vessel. What caught the eye even more were the two cylindrical, open-ended tubes centered in the middle of the ship, dividing the port and starboard sides. It almost looked like a direct connection to the power core. Even better, they looked like no Covenant design Hall had ever seen.

"What the hell is that?" Hall nearly lost his footing with amazement, and settled himself in the nearest seat.

Doyle's vision seemed to falter for a moment, as he leaned forward and back. Or was it him being nervous? "We don't know. But Command wants you to find out; identify the craft, and if necessaryâ€¦|terminate.

"You'll be hooking up with a Midway class Cruiser, the Exeter, for your trip to Reach." The map pulled out and moved a star over from Reach. "You'll meet them here, around this barren neutron star in Delta-Five-B. Link up with the ship, and they'll carry you the rest of the way."

The woman sat back in her seat ,taking a moment away from her notes, "How is a Midway class gonna stand up to something that big?"

Doyle shook his head, "It won't."

"Oh, great!" The marine had a fit, "That's just great. One marine, one tech, one pilot and a lab goon against a stand-alone ship fleet?! You're nuts!"

"And guess what?" Hall said, staring at the marine. The crazed man shifted his gaze to the ace, "We're gonna kick it's ass."

2. An Extra Warm Welcome

Disclaimer: I do not raise claim to the Halo universe, Halo equipment, or any references to the games or franchise. I do own the characters in the following story.

The white glare of slip-space vanished from view as the fast freighter Redeemer shut down it's drive. Hall blinked a few times in an attempt to readjust his vision to the newer, darker surroundings of space. The neutron star off the port side glowed with a dull white that seemed unnatural. Almost alien.

The trio of others from the briefing room hung around Hall's pilot seat like children watching a frog behind their house. None had yet cared to share their names. Hall didn't blame them. It's best not to get attached to someone who may be dead later that day.

"No sign of them?" The woman asked, her loud voice ringing in Hall's ears. He clutched the side of his head and glared at her, warning her not to speak so loudly right next to his head. There was no longer a need to yell over the slip-space drive of the small ship. Light freighters didn't have the oh-so-wonderful sound suppressors around the thing.

"No, nothing." But Hall didn't dare engage the active radar. Doing so would 'ping' the local area and alert any Covenant ships. Considering their hulking transport was all but unarmed, this was not a grand idea.

The marine crossed his arms, "How do we know it's them when we see them?"

"Oh, I don't know," Hall said, his sarcastic voice leaning in, "maybe the brightly colored flag painted on the hull?"

"Did I ask for your opinion, jackass?"

"You certainly needed a verbal kick in the teeth. All I did was give to charity."

The lab tech's nervous voice pitched irritatingly over the two quarrelling soldiers, "What's that?" His hand was pointed at the middle of the freighter's view-monitor.

Hall turned to see what the kid was pointing at, and almost shrugged it off as a rock. But he knew better; there are generally no planetoids around neutron stars. They don't have the mass to keep them in orbit. So whatever it was either was passing through, or under its own power.

"It's not hailing. Covenant?" The woman's voice was still in an obnoxiously loud tone.

Hall ignored her volume, "No, a Covenant cap ship's hull is reflective and would bounce any light. Real shiny. And it's too big to be a smaller ship."

"The Exeter?" The Marine seemed ready to be civil with Hall.

"It's not hailing us."

"No," Hall chimed in, "It's the Exeter."

The Marine roughly grabbed Hall's shoulder, "How can you be sure?"

The pilot simply lifted one hand and gestured towards the aft section of the incoming object, "It's engines are leaking fuel. Ignited fuel."

The engineer in the team automatically knew what that meant, "Oh, my god."

"Yup," Hall confirmed her fears, "it's not Covenant. But Covenant are nearby. If not right on their tails."

Static suddenly filled the crowded crew cabin as the radio chirped to life. A short range transmitter from the inbound ship was trying to establish contact. A series of beeps and clicks followed. Hall went furiously to work trying to match the frequency and send his own message.

"Is that Morse code?" The tech asked, "'Cause I thought that went

dead centuries ago."

Hall nodded, "It did. That's an IFF communicat  . It's asking if we're a friend or foe."

The cynical bite of the Marine's voice visited Hall's tired ears again, "Just out of curiosity, what happens if we don't answer?"

"They blow us away."

"Oh."

"Okay," Hall went for the controls and powered up the engines on the small ship, "We're cleared for a landing in the aft bays. We're also warned; it's a mess inside."

The woman raised her eyebrows, confused, "What?"

"You'll see."

The Redeemer glided underneath the on-coming vessel, and the extent of the damage to the cruiser was suddenly evident. Two the frontal cannons had been taken completely off-line, having lost much of the forward defense array to the fusing heat of plasma burns. Large gaping holes opened the ship's interior to deep-space, and though many of the sections appeared sealed off, the occasional burst of air leaving a chamber was impossible to miss. The cruiser turned listlessly on its side, and rolled endlessly in space, it's lateral thrusters spastically firing, with all control of the engine system lost.

The Exeter appeared to be nothing more than a husk of what could have been its former beauty. Midway class ships were lighter and smaller than the hulking Halcyon class. The Midway class cruiser was intended to be an escort ship for the larger types, or act on it's own in small missions behind enemy lines. Normally, the Covenant paid little to no attention to Midway classes, as they could cause little to no harm to even a small Assault Carrier. But the Exeter appeared to be much different. The show of damage claimed that the Covenant did indeed appreciate the damage a lone cruiser could cause if it decided to throw a monkey wrench into the gears. Ironically, that is exactly what it was there to do.

"I'm taking her in. Brace yourselves."

"Jesus  !"

It was worse than Hall could've imagined. Flames licked at the side of their craft from the ruptured bay walls, and small battalions of men ran across the flight deck with extinguishers attempting to halt the spread of the flames. The dead and the dying littered the floor. Plasma burns were the only decals on the inside of the fighter storage bays. The screams of the dying and the stench of burnt flesh was the greeting for the newcomers. The corpses had already begun to bloat. They'd been dead a while. Corpsmen were carrying the bodies over to launch tubes for the missile systems and jettisoning the bodies that way. Meatball surgery was the paradox of a saving grace and a horrid treatment a few feet away from them, as there was no anesthetic available to be applied to put down the screaming soldier

as a knife sliced open a leg to retrieve a piece of torn rebar. The blood flowed freely across the deck in pools, and even bits of gore were trampled by running men. Some of the organs on the floor even seemed intact.

The woman engineer curled over her gut, as if ready to lose what little she'd had for a meal on the way here. The lab tech was quivering in his boots. The marine, remarkably, was unfazed. He turned to a passing battalion of fire fighters, "Need a hand?" And without another word, he jogged off with them.

"GET A TEAM OVER HERE! THE TANKS! THE TANKS!" The deep voice of an aged soldier called Hall's attention. A small inferno was inching towards a pair of cylindrical tubes, each six feet tall, with a fire hazard symbol on the side.

Before Hall could so much as blink, they went up in a blazing fireball. An invisible wave of warmth washed over Hall, blowing his hair back. Almost immediately afterwards, a second wave seemed to lift him from his feet and carry him backwards on what felt like angel's wings. That is, until he hit the bulkhead of the Redeemer. Something buckled and the pressure was relieved.

Hall blinked, and lolled his head to one side, his vision blurring. The flames continued their dance around him and seemed to circle and blend together, as if they had a conscious mind and wished to descend upon him and consume him. His head felt warm and the flames seemed ready to descend on him and warm the rest of his form.

"Get a medic over here!" The same voice from before called out. A dark shape moved through the creature dividing it's singular purpose and reached down towards Hall. Confused, Hall wasn't sure what the newcomer wanted. Before he recognized the intentions of the form, it made them clear. Hall felt the sensation of weightlessness again, as the form appeared to contain him for a moment, protecting him from the flames. Soon, the heat of the fires were long behind him and the weightlessness was replaced by the soft cushioning of a stretcher.

"Pupils dilated. Pulse erratic. Feel his skinâ€¦ He's going into shock!" The voices seemed so far away. Hall felt a slight tingling on the back of his head, but never considered what it could be. He just wanted to sleepâ€¦

"Get a pack on his head before he bleeds out. And get me some blankets dammit! We don't want to lose him just after he arrived!" He just wanted to sleepâ€¦

"Please, don't close your eyes! Please!" The voice of the woman engineer made it's way through Hall's murky mind. He tried to look for her, but his head was restrained to it's position and his eyes were all but useless anyway. "Don't sleep. Not yet."

3. Up Close and Personal

Disclaimer: I do not raise claim to the Halo universe, Halo equipment, or any references to the games or franchise. I do own the characters in the following story.

Hall opened his eyes. He blinked once, then again. His vision was clear, and he could see. The fire on the flight deck—he had been—

He immediately went to work checking to see if he'd lost any parts of his body he cared for. Satisfied that nothing was missing, he laid his head back again. The fluffy pillow somehow sent a sharp pain through his head.

"Careful!" Hall's eyes traced the voice and saw a man in a white lab coat approach. "You'll aggravate the wound."

"You a doctor?"

"Something like that," the man leaned out of Hall's field of view and appeared to be talking to someone, "He's awake. No, you can't seem him yet. He's weak enough as it is, miss, with his head split open. The last thing he needs is to be excited, it might make him relapse."

Hall couldn't see if there was anyone else in the room, and judging by the pauses between each comment, he was probably on a private ship comm. Not uncommon on the older battle cruisers, and more effective under fire, as they were harder to damage. The newer ones were some of the first ship systems to go. Fragile little bastards.

"Look," The doctor continued, "he's conscious but not strong. You want to throw him into a relapse fine, but I'm the one who gets to fix him, y'know!" The man finally stepped back into Hall's vision and approached the bedside, "How ya doin'?"

Hall didn't have much to complain about. His back hurt a bit, but not too much, and he still had that strange tingling on the back of his head.

"What happened?" His murky memories were of no use to him in that respect.

The doctor crossed his arms, "You don't remember?" The man's attitude was corrected by Hall's immediate annoyed look. "Oh, yeah. Your head."

"Oh, yeah. My head." The sarcastic tone was perhaps over the top, but it got the message across.

The doctor cocked his head to one side, obviously irritated by Hall's disdain, "You cracked your head against a bulkhead. That tingling sensation? That's your fractured skull under Narcosep pain killer. Your head is open to the air."

Hall wished he hadn't asked. The thought of his head bleeding on the cold deck made his stomach turn. It also brought to mind the image of all the others in worse condition. Those closer to the explosion—Hall thought he'd puke.

He rolled over in bed away from the doctor. In the cot next to him was a man, asleep, his heart monitor pulsating with a regular beat. The sheet covered the man up to his chest, but unless there was a trap door in the bed, the man had no legs.

"Hey!" The forgiving sound of a familiar voice brought Hall back from the edge of total digestive meltdown. Hall turned away from his thoughts towards the doctor, who was rapidly overtaken by his three companions, the woman engineer in the lead.

The marine crossed his arms, a smile on his face, "You made it."

Hall raised an eyebrow, "I guess I did." A chuckle was his only response.

"We thought we'd lost you," The tech said, in a strangely upbeat tone.

"Well," Hall raised himself up on one elbow, "You're not that lucky."

The woman, the engineer simply smiled, "I'm Rachel; Rachel Willows."

Hall was taken aback by this sudden opening up. She was ready to trust him to stay alive—right after he almost died? "John Hall."

"The name's Rick Mackenzie." The marine's name fit him well.

The lab tech spoke up, following suit, "And I'm Alvin Ferris!"

Unfortunately, Hall barely heard as the men uttered their names. He continued to stare at the engineer, Rachel Willows, who seemed all too pleased with Hall's survival. He locked eyes with her, and for the time being, found himself falling into an endless sleep.

The damage to the Exeter that Hall had seen in the hanger bay was an insect problem compared to the rest of the ship. Entire bulkheads had been ripped from their placements, people blasted out into space from their beds. Weapon emplacements were shaved clean off, rendering the outer hull of the Exeter harmless to enemy bombardments. Life support had been cut for over an hour, and longer in other places. The air had been depleted in a few cabins entirely, and the people who had been locked inside by emergency airlocks had nearly been starved of oxygen. Many were dead. The few survivors were cursed to be slightly better than comatose for the rest of their lives. The Exeter had burned out its engines getting away, and the slip space drive was non-operational. In essence, the cruiser was more of dead weight than a real ship anymore.

Hall stood on the bridge of the ship, next to his three companions. Or at least, what used to be the bridge. The entire front of it was now a gaping hole, where a plasma torpedo had disintegrated the front wall, tactical computers, and main consoles. The vast expanse of space, now half the bridge crew's resting place, was open to the naked eye. A emergency shield was placed over it, but such a thing ran on emergency power, which only lasted for a short while. And something with the force of a falling wrench could break it. The Exeter was on the verge of falling apart. Literally.

Standing on the edge of the 'bridge', staring into that vast expanse, probably towards the many eyes of his fallen comrades stood a man. A

Navy man, judging by uniform, and probably second-in-command by stripe, this officer's solemn gaze gave truth to one simple fact; one of the many faces out there was his captain. It meant one thing; he was now in command of this vessel.

"Second Mate Jacob Anderson. Or should I say Captain?" Corporal Mackenzie asked, saluting. The navy man turned slowly to face the four assembled on his bridge. Mackenzie snapped off a quick salute, "Reporting for duty, sir."

"Good to hear," the man said. "I suppose you _can_ call me Captain. Field promotions have happened before. And this ship _does_ need a Captain."

Hall remained silent. Regardless of what he thought of it, he had been trained to not speak unless spoken to. It was the way of the military. Discipline, order, respect. If you did not value the man, respect the rank.

Anderson rocked on his heels as he observed the assembly before him. "Well—this is combat ineffective, and we know there's a hostile cruiser nearby, along with it's escorts. Lieutenant Willows!"

"Yes sir!" The woman responded almost out of reflex.

"I need you to head to deck fifteen; that's Engineering. Assist where needed until further orders. Science Officer Ferris, you are to assist Ship Doctor Haslet in treating the wounded. Lance Corporal Mackenzie, they'll need you in the hangar helping out repair crews. Assist wherever you can. First Lieutenant Hall—"

"Yes sir!" Hall snapped his hand up out of reflex, bumping his head. The sharp pain was a single to not do that, even though he was bandaged.

"You're to head back to Medlab and heal up. We'll need every good pilot we've got, and I can't have injured ones overworking themselves. Understood?"

"Sir, with all do respect—"

Anderson did not hesitate to interrupt the junior officer, "That's all, Lieutenant."

Fighting his necessity to stand up for his ability, Hall shut his mouth, biting hard on his tongue till he could taste blood in his mouth. It was a feeling he was certainly getting used to.

"Yes sir."

4. Bloody Greetings

Disclaimer: I do not raise claim to the Halo universe, Halo equipment, or any references to the games or franchise. I do own the characters in the following story.

The patchwork job keeping the _Exeter_ in one piece was certainly remarkable, given the time Rachel was allowed. Along with the surviving engineering team, she repaired both the engine systems and

hull breaches in under twenty four hours. The Slip-space drive and weapons systems would be ready within the next twelve. Rachel probably hadn't slept in a few days, yet she was working as if she'd woken a mere two hours before.

Hall spent his time wandering the ship, learning the ins and outs of the cruiser-carrier and its crew. The engineering team and science divisions were recluses at best, and did not associate outside that circle. The pilots and marines were even worse.

The Mess Hall was dominated by these individuals. With the primary hab blown into space, the secondary mess had to serve the entirety of the ship, some three thousand crew, personnel, and military officers. The tension in the room could split an ocean. The various social classes, officers and enlisted included, were disgusted by the thought of dealing with the other, and military Lieutenants like Hall were caught in the middle, not full officers, but not enlisted men either. In point of fact, Hall's rank was mostly ceremonial. Orders given to technicians and soldiers on the battlefield must be obeyed, as an air or orbital strike is as indiscriminate as the plague, and a command to exfiltrate from a target site cannot be questioned. And so, pilots were always commissioned at first as the lowest officer rank, Second Lieutenant. Many officers looked at this rank with a form of disdain, as much as sovereigns would look at a peasant. And the lower enlisted men, marines, engineers, and simple non-commissioned soldiers, looked up at this lowly officer with royal hatred, as a serf would an unjust lord.

Hall's presence in the mess was therefore unwelcome to every man and woman in the room. Soldiers halted their business long enough to leer at the new entrance. Officers ceased their friendly gossip in order to stare at this foreigner to their world. A hush encased the room in ice. Hall's eyes panned the room, taking in the empty invitation to their world. The Lieutenant moved towards the dispensers for his food, and drink, and so life continued, however the usual clamor seemed to shrink away. Covered jests at Hall's back, and subtle insults across the room were the only exchange given.

"Just who does he think he is?" This louder voice caused Hall to stop in his tracks. A row of pilots stared at him from a table. Setting his tray down in front of the dispenser, Hall turned towards the pilots.

"Excuse me?"

A middle-aged man, his crisp hair of salt and pepper silver, rose from the table. "I asked, 'who does he think he is?'"

Hall raised an eyebrow, witnessing the challenge, "The name's First Lieutenant John Hall, Earth Defense Forces. I heard you guys got your asses kicked, so they called me out here." The gruff and forward attitude of this pilot required a response in kind.

"You weren't here. You didn't see it, nugget."

"Nugget?" The derogatory term for 'rookie' hung in Hall's mind.

The man nodded, "You heard me, nugget. How much battle 'ave you seen?"

Hall cocked his head to one side, the challenge clearly evident. They were doubtful of his abilities, and it wasn't uncommon, this rivalry. New comers were rarely welcomed. Hall didn't blame them, he'd done it himself. You did not want to get to know someone who may be dead in the next few hours. You had to be confident they'd survive and with a death ratio reaching ten deaths to every survivor, you got real good at picking the victors from the losers, "Well, my first combat flight was about forty eight hours ago; I was there when my entire squadron was massacred outside the Earth Defense Grid."

"Some good you were to them." The pilot's voice tripped a bomb in Hall's mind.

"And where the hell were you, hot shot?" Hall snapped, "Two grid platforms, and half a fleet were dusted. Two million people are dead at the hands of a Covenant assault fleet. And you were out here, in the middle of nowhere, fighting a battle no one cares about. They landed, you son of a bitch! We're lucky to have driven them back."

"The Covenant were on the Earth?" The shocked amazement of the crowd grew clear. They were on the fringes of human-controlled space, flimsy as that was; how could they have known?

Hall nodded, "They sacked New Mombasa, before razing it to the ground jumping away." He stared at this opponent, "Think again before calling me that a nugget." The pause in his speech reversed the former insult. "I've seen more flight time than anybody on this deck, and my first combat was the hottest firefight in the war, hotter than Reach."

"Oh, yeah?" the accuser crossed his burly arms across his broad chest, "Then how did you survive?"

Hall's eyes drifted low, examining the spot where the floor met his boots, "Luck. I had my suit on. I was blown into space. SAR picked me up. My co-pilot he didn't." The wince of pain and look of pity in the other pilots' eyes communicated their sorrow. They'd all lost comrades, but few died in such a painful way. Bare skin exposed directly to open space was not pleasant; the uninhibited heat of a star would swiftly boil a human from the inside out. If there were no star with a clear shot, the temperature of space, around two degrees Kelvin, would simply freeze you solid in a manner of seconds. "Hawk-" Hall choked on the name of his friend, "He jumped in the seat without a second thought, saying he'd miss the launch. When we were hit" The images were too graphic for him to retell. The look on Hawk's face as skin curled back to reveal vaporizing bodily liquids was too much for Hall's already weak system. A fiery inferno lit up his abdomen.

"Excuse me." And with one hand clutched to his mouth, the other to his failing stomach, Hall left the Mess, and the people before him astounded by this newcomer.

Hall's rapid exit was to the lavatory. He felt his stomach turn upside down and inside out. He bent over a sink, almost by instinct, dumping the contents of his intestines like a recycling bin. A shocking transit from refuse to salt came over him. His stomach fluid changed from the revolting turf color, to a garnet-red.

He couldn't believe his eyes. So it was true. It wasn't in remission.

"You okay?" The voice of his challenger startled Hall. His left hand turned the water on, washing the filth away almost by instinct.

He mimed washing his hands, "Yeah, I'm alright."

The man's hand drifted to the back of his neck, "I'm sorry."

"You've got nothing to be sorry for," Hall's voice was as cold as the vacuum that had taken his friend.

"Yeah, wellâ€¦I should have known better. Man doesn't come this far away from home without a damn good reason."

Hall slowed his motions, taking that thought in, before resuming his cleanup. The man stepped forward, his image reflected in the glossy mirror before him, "The name's Travis Derringer, callsign Phoenix."

"An honor, Major," Hall said, daring to catch the assailant's rank from his shoulder medals.

"When we get to Reachâ€¦that's the last thing you'd ever say to your new wing commander."

End
file.